

April 10, 2000

Testimony of Frank Mirarchi before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

Good morning Madame Chairman, Senators, and Committee Staff. My name is Frank Mirarchi. I am a commercial fisherman from Massachusetts. My son Andrew and I operate a 62 ft. dragger out of Scituate.

I have fished for 37 years. Andrew has virtually grown to adulthood aboard our boat. Today he is an invaluable partner in a family business. His is the face of tomorrow's fisherman.

My town, as are most small New England ports, is dominated by such family centered fishing businesses. Two generation boats are commonplace.

It is now nearly 25 years since Congress declared an EEZ in our coastal waters. I clearly recall the excitement and sense of opportunity which prevailed in those days.

Unfortunately as I speak before you today I must report that the opportunity remains largely unfulfilled. We built new boats, adopted new technologies, and supplied new markets. Unfortunately, as a nation, were heedless of the finite and fragile nature of marine resources, ecosystems, and habitats. We practiced the philosophical error articulated by Thomas Huxley in the late 19th Century - the sea is so vast our boats are so small therefore our fisheries have no discernible impact.

In the intervening decades unprecedented change have reshaped our fisheries. Open access is no longer an unchallenged right. Intricate rules dictate almost every facet of our activities from catches to gear characteristics to reporting standards. Despite this, success remains elusive with Congress now being asked to provide emergency financial aid to impacted fishermen on a regular basis.

Does this mean that "sustainable fishing" is an oxymoron? After years of observation and reflection my answer is a resounding "No."

Since the earliest application of technology to artisinal fishing the guiding philosophy has been "more .... quicker and cheaper." The cost of this premise only became apparent when biological failure finally resulted in economic dislocation.

Magnuson-Stevens is forcing us to consider external costs as an integral part of management. This is a good thing but one which quickly makes us realize we simply do not have answers to many of the most pertinent questions. Here are some examples:

(1) The Northeast Fisheries Science Center in Woods Hole, Mass provides some of the best stock assessments available. Their trawl survey produces an index of abundance which is a reliable barometer of biomass.

However, simply knowing the abundance of a stock is no longer sufficient information. Fishing takes place at a different spatial scale than survey work. Due to lack of finer resolution data we are compelled to close 600 square nautical mile blocks in the Gulf of Maine to suppress the catch of cod which may occur in only a small fraction of each area.

(2) The catch of non-targeted species, known as a bycatch, used to be a nuisance to fishermen culling catches. Now we are recognizing that bycatch mortality is a significant cost of fishing.

The development of more discrete fishing gear, known as conservation engineering, is in its infancy. Devices such as the Nordmore Grate and turtle excluders in shrimp trawls are only the first wave of this technology. How can we continue to improve the efficiency and selectivity of fishing gear?

(3) The impact of fishing operations on fish habitat has only recently become an issue. How serious is the impact? If it is significant, is it more appropriate to modify the offending practices or to create protected areas where fish are unmolested? Perhaps it is more efficient to open areas on a rotational basis, harvesting a “crop” and letting the area remain fallow until another grows.

These are complex and vexatious questions which elude easy answers. Only through the combination of technology and analytical procedures will we be able to unravel the enigmas which still prevent fulfillment of the vision of the framers of Magnuson.

It is truly ironic that a provision in an emergency assistance appropriation may become the catalyst which topples a quarter century of inertia.

The use of fishermen and fishing boats as resources in research is nothing new. Oil companies often turn to fishermen as sources of skilled labor. Ten years ago, faced with declining catches, I began chartering my boat to scientists from the New England Aquarium and the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries to obtain supplementary revenue.

Today companies such as CR Environmental, Inc. of Falmouth, MA. are regularly providing fishing boats for tasks as diverse as baseline monitoring at the Boston sewer outfall and debris recovery at the TWA Flight 800 crash site.

I believe that the skills and knowledge of America's commercial fishermen represent a significant underexploited resource. I wish to be on record as endorsing their inclusion as collaborators in applied research aimed at obtaining answers to questions such as I have earlier identified.

I furthermore assert that in addition to the technical skills and detailed knowledge which

fishermen can provide there is another intangible but potentially valuable benefit. The schism which has developed between fishermen and fishery regulators and scientists must be healed. How tragic if fishery management degenerates into a lawyer's game of convoluted rules and sophisticated evasions. The bonds of trust can be restored in no better way than working together in the planning and execution of collaborative research projects.

In closing I would like to offer some suggestions where legislative action could facilitate the growth of this important and overlooked component of sound fishery policy.

(1) Streamline NMFS' permitting process - experimental fishery permits, required for non conforming gear now require extensive reviews which could well be modified without significant impact.

(2) Develop ways to overcome regulatory impediments - issues such as workplace safety standards and availability of insurance coverage must be considered. An example is a loan program to enable purchase of additional safety and survival equipment.

(3) Develop a durable, long term funding mechanism. While using emergency assistance funding as an initial source is appropriate, the need for research will persist long after the current crisis passes. I believe applied research to be an investment which generates positive benefits to the nation. There needs to be debate concerning the source of funding as well as the development of a distribution process.

Fish are a renewable resource. We would be rightfully indignant to learn that agriculture was being conducted without attention to practices which would compromise its sustainability. We can accept no less of fishing.

Thank you for the opportunity to present my views today.